

THE MANSION AND ITS CONSTRUCTORS

DON DOMINGO JOSÉ HERRERA AYALA Y ROXAS PONTE Y LLARENA XUAREZ DEL CASTILLO (1714-1766), was the XI Count of La Gomera, VI Marquis of Adeje, Lord of this town and had even more titles still.

The title of Count of La Gomera was the oldest title in the Canary Islands, and one of the oldest of Spain. It was originally given by the Royal Crown (or the Catholic Monarchs) to **DON DIEGO HERRERA Y DOÑA INÉS PERAZA** who had inherited the islands from her father but as the Catholic Monarchs wanted the islands to be part of the Royal Crown they were given the title as compensation. As the XI Count of La Gomera had no descendents...

The XI Count of La Gomera had been in the navy - he was a captain of the Spanish Armada - but on inheriting the titles and wealth of his family he left active service and dedicated himself to the administration of his properties, that, together with the fortune that he had accumulated when he was in the navy, made him a very rich man - and the richest Count of La Gomera in history.

In 1754 the Count married the previously mentioned **DOÑA MARINA LEONOR BENITES DE LUGO Y PONTE** y they lived sitted in the Orotava. But as the Count wanted to be treated almost as Royalty by the local inhabit and considered he was not respected enough he decided to leave the Orotava so as not to have to mix with the locals.

His father-in-law gave him some land in the property of El Durazno, on which he began to construct a mansion which today we know as "La Casona" or "The Big House". He made an oratory in the house and placed a beautiful statue of Saint Anthony in it. He had horses and on the ground floor had some stables made for them.

The Count and his wife had no descendents. He died in the "Big House" 24 December 1766 due to chronic illness and his titles and properties were passed on to his neice. The Countess survived him by 42 years but never remarried and on dying in 1808, the house and its contents were inherited by her nephews, sons of her eldest brother.

The eldest brother of the Countess, **FRANCISCO BAUTISTA BENITEZ DE LUGO ARIAS DE SAAVEDRA Y PONTE**, was the ninth owner of the Big house of Benitez de Lugo. He had done some business with the wine of the farm which had not worked out well and contributed to the financial downfall of the family.

In 1791, he gave land belonging to the estate of El Durazno to the King which was used to found the **Botanical Garden**.

Francisco Bautista Benítez de Lugo had six children. The eldest **FRANCISCO BAUTISTA BENITEZ DE LUGO ARIAS DE SAAVEDRA Y LUGO**, inherited the ownership and therefore became the tenth owner of the estate of El Durazno. He died aged 33 leaving only one daughter, just a few days old, **ELENA SEBASTIANA**.

A younger sister of Francisco Bautista Benítez de Lugo, **ANTONIA BENITEZ DE LUGO**, had married a man from the village, **JOSE DOMINGO GONZALEZ NUÑEZ**, and they formed what was considered an unsuitable marriage. They had one son **JUAN DOMINGO GONZALEZ Y BENITEZ DE LUGO**, born in 1816 approx. . When her elder brother died, Antonia, in the name of her small son, went to law against her neice **ELENA SEBASTIANA**, defending herself in the call of rigorous male. She won her case in 1817 and the estate of El Durazno with the Big House

included became the property of **JUAN DOMINGO GONZALEZ Y BENITEZ DE LUGO**. In time he married Carmen Hernandez and three children survived: Juan, José y **ANTONIA GONZALEZ HERNANDEZ**.

"The statue of San Anthony belonged to the Oratory of this house which was inherited by my grandmother Doña Antonia González Hernandez. On the death of my grandmother, Antonia González Hernandez, my mother Doña María Antonia Pérez González inherited it. On her death in 1982, it was passed down to me and remains in my possession, and will eventually belong to my daughter etc, ...

The San Anthony del Durazno was brought to Venezuela in 1987 when the first altar under his advocacy was made on American soil. This statue is said to be approx. 400 years old dating back to approx. 1537. Its origin is unknown.

The Big House has a Royal Privilege - any prisoner condemned to death that enters the enclosure, cannot be taken out and least of all executed, while he remains within its domain, which means he is given a pardon. The last condemned prisoner which was given this privilege was a cow on its way to the abattoir. On beating it so that it would run, it entered the enclosure of the house when the Royal Privilege was carried out, and the cow died of old age within the grounds of the house." (Letter from Antonio Reverón Pérez, Venezuela, 31 June 1987).

When Don Juan González y Benítez de Lugo died, the estate with the Big House included was bought by **DON FELIPE MACHADO Y BENITEZ DE LUGO** (1836-1930). He was married to **DOÑA ELENA BENITEZ DE LUGO Y BENITEZ DE LUGO**, daughter of **ELENA SEBASTIANA**, the same one who lost the estate in 1817. Don Felipe Machado spent a lot of time in the house, that was partly furnished.

He had it rented for some time to an English family that brought with it a scottish nanny. She lived in the old dining room during which time she painted on the beans in the corner of the room the following:

Some hae meat and canna eat
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat and we can eat,
And sae the Lord be thankit.

From the poem "Selkirk Grace".

When Don Felipe Machado died, the house was left to **DOÑA MARGARITA MACHADO Y BENITEZ DE LUGO** (1873-1931), who in turn left it to her son **DON FERNANDO DEL HOYO Y MACHADO** (1890-1978), VII Marquis of San Andrés y Mayor of the Orotava.

The house was bought in 1970 by **PAUL DENHAM**, who was of Czechoslovakian origen. He had been in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War and afterwards took British nationality and adopted a British surname. He had done great success and looked for somewhere to retire.

He saw the Big House of El Durazno, fell in love with it, and bought it. He spent the next 14 years doing very costly and extensive restoration.

Paul Denham died in 1993 and his heirs, a son and 2 daughters who were already living in England decided to sell the house, which was bought by **RAUL HERNANDEZ ALONSO** in 1995.